

AUGUSTINE, THE RELIGIOUS EDUCATOR: HIS RELEVANCE FOR EDUCATING CHRISTIANS IN CONTEMPORARY SOCIETY

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Abstract

Jesus came into the world purposely to inaugurate the Kingdom of God and invited people to repent and enter into it – cf. Mk 1: 15. He called his apostles and disciples to be with him in the course of his ministry here on earth. After forming them, he sent them into the world with these words, “Go therefore, make disciples of all the nations, baptize them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teach them to observe all the commands I gave you. And know that I am with you always, to the end of time” – Matt. 28:19-20.

The apostles carried out this great commission in the apostolic times. After their demise, the mantle fell on the church Fathers like Clement, Athanasius and Tertullian.

One of the church Fathers who has greatly influence Christianity through his teachings is Augustine.

In this paper, Augustine’s First Catechetical Instructions and its relevance for Christians in contemporary society is examined.

Keywords: Religion, Christianity, Contemporary Society

Introduction

Christians proclaim God to be omnipotent. There is no question that God can do everything by Himself without the co-operation of human beings. Nonetheless, that is not what we have experienced in the course of human history. From time immemorial, God has used human beings to speak to God's people and the world. God used Moses to bring the Israelites out of Egypt. Judges, Kings and Prophets were used as mediums through whom God spoke to God's people. For us, Christians, God's love and care for God's people culminated in the incarnation of Jesus - (ct. Heb. 1: 1-2).

Throughout his ministry, Jesus announced the Kingdom of God, preached God's word and called people to repentance and renewal of life - (ct. Mk. 1 :15). When his time on earth was ended, Jesus instructed his disciples to continue the education of people about the Kingdom of God:

go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teach them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age. (Matt. 28: 19-20)

Following this mandate, the disciples of Jesus have tried to be faithful to the Lord. People have been educated and/or made Christians in the course of the history of the Church. Great teachers like Paul, Hippolytus, Cyril of Jerusalem, Augustine, John Chrysostom and Aquinas have come and gone. Today, the mandate has been handed on to the magisterium and the theologians of the Church. The work of educating Christians and

the world continues unabated. It is for this reason that the encyclicals like *Catechesis Tradendae* and *Veritatis Splendor* were issued by John Paul II in recent times.

In this paper, I intend to offer a critique of one of the great teachers in history who has very much influenced the Church and the world. I am speaking of Augustine. I must point out right from the beginning that I am not analyzing Augustine as a systematic theologian. Neither am I looking at Augustine's ethics nor his spirituality. I am only interested in Augustine from the point of view of religious education. In other words, I want to see whether as an educator, Augustine's approach of educating Christians has any relevance today. That is to say, whether as Christians of today, we can retrieve something from Augustine's *First Catechetical Instructions* (which henceforth in this paper will be referred to as FCI) written about 1,500 years ago.

In the paper, I will look at the Church at the time of Augustine. This will be followed by a brief history of Augustine's life. Then, I will discuss the FCI. Under this, I will examine the contents and the purpose of the FCI. The next point that I will discuss will be the relevance of the FCI for educating Christians today. The last part will be the conclusion.

The Church at the time of Augustine

One will appreciate Augustine and his FCI better if one has an idea of the structure of the Church at the time of Augustine. It has to be pointed out that Jesus did not give a blue-print of how the Church should be structured. In fact, one cannot say with certainty any real sense of institutionalization of the Church at the time of Jesus. As Marianne Sawicki points out,

*it was the first century after Jesus' death that saw the growth of the church into an organization with institutional structures into which caring, celebration and teaching functions were departmentalized.*¹

This does not mean that one cannot discern some form of institutionalization among Jesus' disciples at the time of Jesus. For,

*institutionalization is a natural, sociological process, by which complex societies retain their identities over time and insure their own propagation. Where two or three gather, no matter in whose name, for longer than a week, an institution is sure to appear.*²

All that I am saying is that Jesus and his original followers were wandering prophets. They left their homes and families in order to preach about the Kingdom of God. However, as the membership began to spread, the work was becoming too much for the original disciples. Therefore, people were appointed to take charge of certain functions such as the distribution of goods. This was the beginning of the diaconate (cf. Acts 6:1-7).

Through the preaching of the Word, communities were formed. These settled communities needed teachers and care takers. Thus, we read in both the disputed and undisputed letters of Paul, how overseers and teachers were appointed for the various communities (cf. Titus 1:5-16, ITm. 3:1-13; I Cor. 12:4-11).

It was in the early part of the second century that the monarchical episcopate began to develop. Elaborate ceremonies were given about how bishops were to be chosen, how they were to be ordained and their functions clearly spelt out. According to Hippolytus, bishops were to be chosen by all the people. Upon acceptance, the community was to assemble on the Lord's day together with presbyters and other bishops. When all had given their consent, the newly - elected bishop was to be ordained but only by the bishops present.³ Thus, the organization of each church became under a single bishop having responsibility for all the affairs of the church. The role of the bishop gradually grew more important. In general, presbyters who were not different from bishops in many New

Testament texts began to be under the bishop. They assisted the bishop with cultic and teaching duties. Deacons and widows were also called upon to assist the bishop in the administration of the goods of the church for the welfare of the poor.

With the legalization of the Church by the empire in 313, the position of the bishop acquired an added civil status. Bishops began to be judges in disputed cases and their judgments carried the force of civil law. As Marianne Sawicki notes, "in the minds of the people, the bishop's role acquired aspects of the role of the civil governor."⁴ As Eliane Pagels also points out,

*Christian bishops, once targets for arrest, torture, and execution, now received tax exemptions, gifts from the imperial treasury, prestige, and even influence at court; their churches gained new wealth, power, and prominence.*⁵

This was the position of the bishop when Augustine came on the scene.

One of the important functions of the bishop was offering instructions to those in the catechumenate. In most cases, catechumens were given moral instructions before baptism and *eucharist*. It was after the reception of these sacraments that they were given instructions about the mysteries that they had participated in. Thus, we read that Cyril, bishop of Jerusalem took great pains to explain the rich symbols, the gestures and the rituals of the Church to new members of the Church in his *Mystagogical Lectures*.⁶ This task of instructing new members as a bishop is what Augustine is going to do in his FCI as we shall see later on in the paper.

A brief History of the Life of Augustine

Born to a very strong and a devout Catholic mother and a pagan father, Augustine had to struggle to be his real self. At sixteen, he broke even with his mother and began to live his own life to the displeasure of his parents especially his mother, Monica. He gave birth to a son out of wedlock whom he named Adeodatus, even though Augustine never mentioned the name of the woman.

Augustine was a brilliant student. From the time that he turned nineteen till twenty-nine, Augustine was fascinated by the Manichees who were considered as heretics by the Church. He joined them. However, after some time, he became disillusioned with their teachings and broke away from them. Even when he left the Manichees, he did not join the Church immediately. He left Carthage to teach Rhetorics in Rome. In Rome, he heard of Ambrose, an eloquent bishop of Milan. Augustine went to listen to the sermons of Ambrose, not out of any desire for a spiritual growth but because of the Rhetorics of Ambrose. That was the beginning of the turning point in his life.

The decisive moment of his conversion to Christianity came when he heard a voice say to him, "take and read, take and read." On taking a bible that was beside him, he opened randomly to Rom. 13:13-14. Augustine sought baptism afterwards together with his son and became a Christian. On their return journey home to Africa, his mother, Monica died. Augustine rose to become the bishop of Hippo.

The First Catechetical Instructions

As pointed out earlier on, one of the functions of the bishop was offering catechetical instructions to people. It was in pursuance of this function that Augustine came out with the FCI which in a way was his catechetical theory.

Purpose: The FCI was written at the request of Deogratias. Deogratias was a deacon at Carthage who wanted a format of how catechumens were to be instructed and what should constitute the subject matter of catechesis. The purpose of FCI was therefore to enable catechists to have something in hand that they could refer to when educating people in the Christian faith. Augustine never intended it to be used as a

blue-print. They were to be adapted for pastoral reasons -

*But before I do this, I would have you bear in mind that the aim of one dictating a catechetical instruction with a future reader in view is different from that of one catechizing with the listener actually present.*⁷

Augustine went on to say that;

*if this discourse, in which I have instructed a candidate if present seems long to you, you may treat the subject more briefly; I do not think, however that it should be longer. Though much depends upon what the actual case suggests, and upon what the audience present before you show that they not only endure, but even desire.*⁸

Secondly, the purpose of FCI was to encourage Deogratias to be enthusiastic about his work as a deacon and not to be dismayed because of his short - comings and failures.

Contents: The FCI is divided into two parts. The first part is the theory of catechesis. It consists of fifteen chapters. Chapters sixteen to twenty seven constitute the second part which deals mainly with the practice of catechesis.

Salvation History: - Augustine talked about what should be taught when catechizing. According to him, the whole economy of our salvation history should be the subject matter of catechesis. This means that the catechist must begin from God's dealings with people from creation of the world to the present period of Church history. To this should be added the Church's doctrine on the last things of human beings. Catechumens should also be instructed on temptation and scandals that they are likely to face during their catechumenate and on becoming Christians. According to Augustine, this ought to be presented "in a general and comprehensive summary, choosing certain of the more remarkable facts that are heard with greater pleasure and constitute the cardinal points in history."⁹ Nonetheless, the catechist

*ought not present (these) as a parchment rolled up and at once snatch them out of sight, but we ought by dwelling somewhat upon them to untie, so to speak, and spread them out of view, and offer them to the minds of our hearers to examine and admire.*¹⁰

Love of God: Augustine, in giving the subject matter of what to teach, put strong emphasis on the love of God.¹¹ He admonished the catechist to have this in mind all the time and it should be the motivating factor in doing catechesis -

*with this love, then set before you as an end to which you may refer all that you say, so give all your instructions that he to whom you speak by hearing may believe, and by believing may hope, and by hoping may love.*¹²

Motive of the candidate: Augustine taught that candidates should be screened so as to know their motives in desiring to become Christians. If they were becoming Christians in the hope of deriving some benefit or to escape from an injury from people whose displeasure or enmity they dread, then in reality they did not want to become Christians. If they were becoming Christians out of fear of God, then they were to be instructed on the love of God. On the other hand, if they were becoming Christians because they desire true rest and true happiness, then they were to be instructed to raise their hopes from things that perish and pass away and place them in the Word of God; so that, cleaving to that which abides forever, they may also together with it abide forever.¹³

Exhortation: Augustine offered great encouragement to Deogratias to do his catechesis with enthusiasm in spite of his inadequacies. For Augustine, many a time teachers underestimate the great impact that they have on their students because teachers are always after perfection,

But as regards your reflections on your own case, I would not have you be disturbed because you have frequently seemed to yourself to be delivering a worthless and wearisome discourse. For it may very well be that it was not so

*regarded by him whom you were endeavoring to instruct to have something better for your hearers, on this account what you were saying did not seem worthy of other's ears.*¹⁴

Augustine offered himself as an example to Deogratias. He said that many times the eagerness of those who desire to hear him showed him that his discourse was not so dull as it seemed to him. From the enjoyment too which they manifested, he could gather that they had received some benefit from it even though he might feel unworthy.¹⁵

Style: It is worth noting that Augustine did not have one style of educating. His pedagogy was always adapted to the audience. So he wrote to Deogratias,

*It likewise makes a great difference, even when we are speaking under these circumstances, whether there are few present or many; whether learned or unlearned, or mixed audience made up of both classes; whether they are townsfolk or countryfolk, or both together; or a gathering in which all sorts and conditions of men are represented.*¹⁶

Augustine's pedagogy of the educated was different from that of the uneducated. With regard to the educated, Augustine said that we must be brief and not dwell with annoying insistence upon things which they know, but, with discretion, touch lightly upon them.¹⁷ However, the catechist should find out what books they had read. If these books were written by Catholic writers of note, then the catechist should give approval of them. On the other hand, if the authors were considered heretics by the Church, then the catechist must earnestly instruct the one, setting before the one, the authority of the universal Church and that of other most learned people renowned for their disputations and writings concerning the truth of the Church's teaching.

On students from schools of grammar and rhetoric, Augustine had this to say, *when, therefore these men, who seem to surpass all other men in the art of speaking, come to be made Christians, we ought to convey to them more fully than to the illiterate an earnest warning to clothe themselves in Christian humility, and learn not to despise those whom they know as shunning more carefully faults of character than faults of diction; and also that they should not even presume to compare with a pure heart the trained tongue which they had been wont even to prefer.*¹⁸

Augustine, no doubt, was speaking from personal experience. For being a Rhetorician himself and having lived that kind of life before, he knew that knowing God was completely different from knowing about God. Secondly, he knew that students from schools of Grammar and Rhetoric tended to be proud and looked down on others who were not as smart as themselves.

In teaching, Augustine pointed out that the comfort of those being taught should be taken into consideration so as to make learning more enjoyable. He said to Deogratias

*It often happens, too, that one who first was listening glad becomes exhausted either from listening or standing, and now opens his mouth no longer to give assent but to yawn, and even involuntary gives signs that he wants to depart. When we observe this, we should either refresh his mind by saying something seasonal with a becoming liveliness and suited to the matter under discussion, or something calculated to arouse great wonder and amazement, or even grief and lamentation.*¹⁹

Augustine emphasized narration as preferred pedagogy. Nonetheless, he did not mean catechizing to be just an intellectual or academic exercise. The catechist must allow the catechumens to examine and admire whatever they have been taught.

Augustine's style of educating people can be summarized in these words,

And since the same medicine is not to be applied to all, although to all the same love is due, so also love itself is in travail with some, becomes weak with others; is at pains to edify some, dreads to be a cause of offense to others; is gentle to some, at stern to others; and enemy to none, a mother to all.²⁰

The Relevance of the First Catechetical Instructions Today

Even though Augustine's FCI was written about thousand six hundred years ago, there are many things that we can retrieve as religious educators when educating Christians today.

(a) Christians as a community: One cannot become a Christian and live an individual private life. To be a Christian is to belong to a community. The Christian community has an identity. To be identified with the Christian community, one has to know the history of the community. It is for this reason that Augustine pointed out that the subject matter of catechetical instructions should include our salvation history which begins with the creation of the world to the coming of Christ, without excluding the doctrines of the Church. Luther had the same concerns in his days when people supposed to be Christians did not know their catechism and so he complained -

although the people are supposed to be Christians, are baptized, and receive the holy sacrament, they do not know the Lord's Prayer, the Creed, or The Ten Commandments, they live as if they are pigs and irrational beasts.²¹

I think as Christians of today, we cannot neglect our past. Knowledge and wisdom of our past history that identify us as a Christian community should be made accessible to catechumens, though with historical consciousness, we must unlearn certain things like patriarchy and the subjugation of certain classes of people.

(b) Motive of the candidate: I think Augustine's scrutiny of candidates to know why they were becoming Christians is still relevant today. People (grown - ups) should become Christians out of their own volition and not out of compunction. They should become Christians, not for any earthly benefits or out of fear of God. Rather, as Augustine said it has to be because they want true happiness and true rest. Searching for the motive of the person to become a Christian can be seen today in the stage of the scrutinies during the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults (RCIA).

(c) Exhortation of catechists: Catechists need to be motivated and encouraged today just as Augustine encouraged and supported Deogratias in spite of his failures and inadequacies. That is the only way that catechists can do their work with enthusiasm. Without enthusiasm in doing catechesis, the catechist can burn out easily in less than no time.

(d) Student - centered pedagogy: I like very much Augustine's student - centered approach in educating people in faith. This does not mean that the discipline of contents should be neglected. Rather, it is the student who becomes the subject or the main focus of the education process. The education process is to enable the student to learn what he/she needs

in order to have a better life and to have a better relationship with others. As people from all walks of life desire to become Christians today, the catechist cannot use the same approach for everyone. As Augustine suggested, the discourse needs to be adapted to the audience. This suggestion to Deogratias is still relevant today.

Conclusion

Augustine is one of the great teachers of the Church. Despite the harsh criticisms levelled against him today by people like Elaine Pagels,²² I think that as a religious educator,

Augustine has something to teach us as we educate Christians today. After all we must be careful not to throw away the baby with the bath water.

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